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SUBJECT: (S) DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE OFFICER TO CODEL LEVIN:
OUR PRE-WAR ESTIMATES OF IRAQI WMD WERE NEARLY AS WRONG AS
YOURS

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

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Summary

1. (S) A senior defense intelligence (DMI) officer told Senator Levin March 31 that pre-OIF Israeli intelligence estimates of Iraqi WMD were nearly as wrong as those of the USG. GOI analysts, prior to the war, "knew" that Saddam's regime would never support al-Qaeda or any other terrorist organization fomenting "jihad." While the Israeli intelligence community placed events in Iraq at the center of their 2003 national security estimate for the region, it now sees Iraq as just one of several influential factors. The GOI sees no evidence of Iranian support for terrorism in Iraq, and assesses that the top priority for the Iranian regime in Iraq at present is stability, which Iranian leaders understand is the surest path to a U.S. departure from the region. Iran, meanwhile, with an eye toward long-term influence in Iraq, is building its ties with all the Iraqi ethnic groups. A DMI analyst assessed that the recent decrease in terrorism in Iraq could be only cyclical, although he thought that terrorism in Iraq could fade away for good if Iraqi Shi'ites and Kurds allow the Sunnis to play a meaningful role in national political life. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) Senator Carl Levin discussed Israel's pre-OIF intelligence-gathering on Iraq, and current GOI assessments of Iraq, in a March 31 meeting with Col. Itai Brun, the deputy chief of Production for Israeli military intelligence (DMI). LTC Avi Zaroni and LTC Aviad Sela of DMI's Gulf States office also participated in the meeting. Senate staff, Embassy Army Attache and poloff accompanied Sen. Levin.

Pre-War Israeli Intelligence on Iraq

3. (S) Pointing to findings in the just-released Robb-Silberman report of what he called a "90 percent failure" in U.S. pre-war assessments of Iraq's WMD capabilities, Sen. Levin asked Brun whether pre-war Israeli intelligence assessments were as wrong as those of the USG. "We were very close" to the U.S. estimate, Brun acknowledged in response. He said that DMI -- which compiles national estimates from all-source GOI intelligence -- assessed prior to OIF that Iraq had "residual" launchers and surface-to-surface missiles, and chemical and biological weapons that could be delivered either by missiles or bombs.

4. (S) DMI reached its assessment, Brun continued, fully aware that it had no direct evidence of the existence of Iraqi missiles or WMD. Its ultimate conclusion that Iraq possessed missiles and WMD concealed underground came from its "strategic assessment," based on Saddam's behavior throughout the 1990s, that Saddam would never give up his former missile or WMD capabilities. Brun noted that the only major GOI decision related to the assessment was the order to distribute gas masks to the Israeli population just prior to OIF. The GOI, he commented, made the decision mainly for political reasons, and not based on any judgment about the certainty of the DMI estimate. The only aspect of the estimate that mattered to the GOI in making the gas-mask decision, he said, was that DMI could not rule out the possibility that Iraq would launch WMD-bearing missiles against Israel.

5. (S) Sen. Levin asked whether Israeli intelligence had perceived, prior to OIF, any relationship between Saddam's regime and al-Qaeda. Brun said Israeli assessments did not address the issue. LTC Zaroni added that the GOI had information about contacts between "second- and third-level" al-Qaeda operatives and the Iraqi regime, but "knew" that the secular Ba'athist regime in Iraq would not support "jihad."

6. (S) Sen. Levin asked whether the GOI had received any information about purported Iraqi purchases of yellowcake from Niger. Brun said Israeli intelligence had not looked at the issue because it did not believe that Iraq had a nuclear program of concern.

The Impact of OIF on the Region

17. (S) As background to his points on how the GOI sees the impact of events in Iraq, Col. Brun summarized key trends that the GOI has perceived throughout the region over the past four years. The events of September 11, and the Bush Administration reaction to them, have shaken up the region, he said. The precedent of an Arab regime toppled, the presence of U.S. forces in the center of region and on two sides of Iran, and the message that WMD are illegitimate, placed regional leaders on the defensive.

18. (S) The "shock" that Brun said regional leaders experienced in 2002-2003 turned into what he termed a wait-and-see posture in 2004, as the leaders awaited the outcome of U.S. difficulties in Iraq and the U.S. presidential election. President Bush's reelection, Arafat's death and other "dramatic events" have now shaken regional leaders out of their waiting mode, he said. The GOI sees these regional leaders now following one of three paths:

-- "Active resistance." Regimes and groups pursuing this path are fighting against the influence of the United States, Israel and the West. Examples: Iran, "Global Jihad," Hizballah, Zarqawi, Palestinian rejectionist groups.

-- "Change and Modification." States following this path understand the need for change. Examples: Egypt, Jordan, PA President Abbas and some other new PA leaders. Brun commented that Abbas' electoral victory was a hopeful sign because it implied popular endorsement of Abbas' opposition to the use of violence throughout the Intifada.

-- "Indecision." This is the path of groups and regimes, such as Hamas and Syria, that have traditional ties to terrorism, but are considering shifts in behavior based on changes in the region. Hamas, for example, has taken the "historic strategic decision" to enter the PA political system. Syria, whose support for terrorism has always been based on "pragmatic" instead of ideological considerations, is looking for ways to change, but has few "assets" with which to work. President Assad, in fact, is about to lose one of his major assets, the Syrian occupation of Lebanon, with a possible impact on the ultimate survivability of his regime.

19. (S) Iraq, Brun continued, was at the center of DMI's annual national security estimate in 2004. DMI assessed then that all actors in the region understood that Iraq was the "decisive battlefield." Iraq remains important in DMI's 2005 assessment, Brun said, but less so from a regional perspective. The key intervening event, in DMI's analysis, was President Bush's reelection, which, he said, demonstrated to the region that the United States would remain in the region for the next several years. Iraq, moreover, is no longer the only prospective model of democratization in the region, given successful elections in the PA, Afghanistan, and perhaps soon in Lebanon.

Iran's Influence on Iraq

10. (S) LTC Zaroni assessed Iranian designs on Iraq at Sen. Levin's request. Iran, he said, appears to be reaching out to all groups in Iraq, and not just to the Shi'ites, with whom, in any case, its influence is limited by religious differences and clerical rivalries. The GOI has seen no clear evidence that Iran is supporting terrorism in Iraq, he said. Iran's outreach appears motivated by an interest in building connections for the long term. It wants to see Iraq "oriented" toward Iran in the long-term. The issue is not religion, but balance of power. Iran's top priority in the interim is to see the United States leave the region, a goal it understands will require a stable Iraq. Democratic change in Iraq does not threaten Iran, he said, commenting that the Iraqi political system appears to be evolving toward something roughly similar to the Iranian system.

11. (S) Sen. Levin asked why Iran would not try to push the U.S. out of Iraq by supporting the insurgency. Zaroni replied that the Iranians are smarter than President Assad. They realize that support for the insurgency could harden U.S. positions against Iran, e.g., on Iran's nuclear program.

Stabilizing Iraq

12. (S) LTC Zaroni identified three main forces working more or less together in the insurgency in Iraq: Sunni ex-Ba'athists, the Zarqawi organization, and common criminals. The use of terrorism could fade away, he said, should the Shi'ites and Kurds allow the Sunnis to play a meaningful role in the national political process. He

cautioned that a recent decrease in terrorism in Iraq could be only cyclical, noting that attacks have tended to peak around the time of significant events, such as religious holidays and the U.S. elections.

113. (S) Zaroni personally assessed the chances for a political solution in Iraq as "probable," but acknowledged that no consensus exists on the point within DMI. Brun noted that Israeli experts on Iraq tend to assert that the ethnic rivalries inscribed in "Iraqi DNA" preclude the possibility that Iraqis will ever establish a workable democratic process. This view does not necessarily imply that Iraqis are doomed to civil war, he said, although Zaroni then added that a civil war, and ensuing national break-up, is a real possibility given the conflicting interests of the three main ethnic groups.

114. (S) Sen. Levin asked Zaroni to assess U.S. training of the Iraqi security forces. Zaroni said the training appeared unsuccessful until a few months ago, when a new U.S. attitude emerged. LTC Sela described the perceived U.S. change as one that allows for more self-reliance for the Iraqi security forces. Zaroni pointed to concerns that some members of the security forces are passing information to the insurgents.

115. (S) Sen. Levin asked whether GOI and U.S. assessments about the future of Iraq differ in any significant ways. Zaroni commented that differences exist within both analytic communities, but allowed that members of both communities generally concur that short-term prospects in Iraq are "very complex." The debate within the GOI community, Brun added, focuses on whether democracy can succeed in Iraq -- and indeed anywhere in the region -- in the long term.

116. (S) Sen. Levin asked for an assessment of the impact of the war in Iraq on the global struggle against terrorism. Brun said GOI analysts see change only in Iraq, where terrorism has clearly increased.

117. (U) Codel Levin did not clear this message, but requested that H forward a copy.

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